

Final wave to Dolphin Club's icon



Liz Hafalia / The Chronicle 2011

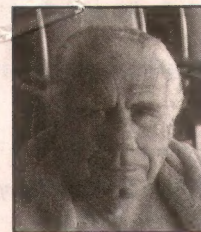
Lou Marcelli, caretaker of the Dolphin Club, reads *The Chronicle* before starting his daily routine at the club in 2011.

Everyone should be required to read the tight, well-written obituary entitled "Lou 'the Glue' Marcelli — was live-in Dolphin Club caretaker" (Oct. 17).

What a guy, what a guy, and no, I won't use that overworked phrase, "Renaissance Man." He was much more than that.

In reading Meredith May's piece, his story just got better and better. I loved this guy, and I never got to meet him. Thank you, Meredith, for telling his tale.

Bonnie Jones, San Francisco



Louis Joseph Marcelli

Commodore of the Dolphin Club, died October 16 at age 85 in San Francisco. Born in Collinsville, California. Father was Aldorico Marcelli born in San Benedetto del Tronto, Italy. Mother was Josephine Romani Marcelli born in California. Brothers Emil Marcelli, Philip Marcelli, Norman Marcelli all of the Bay Area, all now deceased. Survived by sister Frances Rael of Millbrae, CA, sister-in-laws Linda and Joyce Marcelli and loving cousins, nieces and nephews. Memorial services to be held Sunday, October 27th at the Dolphin Club, 502 Jefferson Street, San Francisco 94109 at 2:00 p.m. for family and friends. In lieu of flowers donations may be made to the Dolphin Club Fund earmarked for the Building of a Boat in Mr. Marcelli's name.

OBITUARY

Lou 'the Glue' Marcelli — was live-in Dolphin Club caretaker

By Meredith May

Lou "the Glue" Marcelli, the live-in caretaker of San Francisco's Dolphin Club, lifelong bachelor and sometimes movie extra, died of lung cancer early Wednesday morning at Coming Home Hospice. He was 85.

Until his last months, Mr. Marcelli was still taking daily plunges into the frigid bay along with his fellow Dolphin swimmers, who pride themselves on exercising without wet suits.

Since 1973, Mr. Marcelli had been the self-proclaimed "commodore" of the venerable Dolphin Club, one of the city's oldest athletic clubs that formed in 1877.

It was one of the worst-kept city secrets that Mr. Marcelli lived with a goldfish in the eight-sided cupola atop the Dolphin Club, where he kept tabs on nesting seagulls and enjoyed one of the best views in San Francisco, overlooking Aquatic Park.

Mr. Marcelli lived among a fleet of immaculately varnished early 20th century wooden rowing boats, in a boat-house that also has a stage for performances, a kitchen where Mr. Marcelli made his famous calamari, a back deck for social gatherings, and a bar where every day he mixed his 4 p.m. martini after his daily nap — vodka, straight up — while holding court with club members, fishermen,

boat builders and foodies who tried to figure out how to replicate the Italian recipes he shared on National Public Radio and on television with celebrity chef Mario Batali.

Mornings, Mr. Marcelli could be found reading the paper near the big bay windows in the second-floor community room, in a rocking chair next to a heater. He greeted each swimmer and rower as they passed by on their way to the locker rooms or the weight room.

A way with kids

Although he outlived three of his four siblings, never married or had children, he was often seen walking the neighborhood near Fisherman's Wharf in the early mornings with Ben, 12, and Noah Zovickian, 15, first in strollers, then on foot, while the brothers' parents swam.

"When Lou first held Noah, when Noah was 5 months old, it was pretty clear he'd not held many babies," said mother Laura Zovickian.

"Lou took the stroller and said, 'How do you drive this thing?' We never assumed he would do this day after day, then year after year. He became their godfather," she said.

Ben said goodbye to Lou a few days before he died.

"The three of them had their own life together," Laura Zovickian said. "They knew all these people on Fisher-

man's Alley, they knew the street sweeper, they had certain cafes they went to."

Friends who cared

A former Alaska fisherman, Mr. Marcelli showed up at the boat-house when the previous caretaker moved into a retirement home. He was looking for something to do, an excuse to escape the routine of his raucous North Beach roommates, who liked to drink until last call night after night.

At the time he was working as a North Beach bartender and music promoter as well as a mailman. His commodoreship at the Dolphin Club was always a volunteer position, but he never went wanting because the club members took care of him.

Friends brought him groceries and handled his legal affairs, watched ballgames with him inside the Dolphin Club, took him on trips, swam by his side. Electricians fixed wiring, craftsmen repaired the boats, doctors and dentists cared for him.

Several times a week, his girlfriend of 39 years, who he affectionately called "the broad," cooked with him inside the boathouse kitchen, and they put a large family-style table in between the antique boats for whoever wanted to join them. He was delighted by her ceramic sculptures of animals, and decorated the boat-house with them.



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Dolphin Club caretaker Lou Marcelli finishes his morning swim in May 2011.

"He used to bartend at a place called the Intrigue, and every time I came in he played that song, 'What Are You Doing for the Rest of Your Life,'" said girlfriend Cynthia Coppi.

Finally, he got the nerve to ask her out, waiting until her date went to the bathroom to lean over the bar and ask for a date.

"I thought that was sort of bold," Coppi said.

Mr. Marcelli's good looks and gravelly voice attracted her, and later, a Dolphin Club member who was a talent scout, parlayed Mr. Marcelli's "Sopranos" gruff-guy persona into bit parts in TV commercials as a member of the Screen Actors Guild.

Born in Collinsville in Solano County, Mr. Marcelli grew up swimming in the Sacramento River Delta but by his own admission never learned to do it with any grace. His grandparents hailed from Palermo, Italy, and his father was a Bay

Area fisherman. After graduating from Rio Vista High, Mr. Marcelli moved to Telegraph Hill at the height of the beatnik era and helped manage a North Beach bar called Dino and Carlo's. For extra cash, he fished in the summers with his brother on salmon boats in Alaska.

He began swimming in Aquatic Park in 1943, discovered more than a decade later that there was a club there and became a Dolphin in 1965.

He earned the nickname the Glue for his skill in sticking to a North Beach bar stool. Over time, the name came to honor his dedication to the Dolphin Club.

A mallard man

A reformed duck hunter, Mr. Marcelli developed a special bond with several pairs of migrating mallards who came to the dock each year. He fed them, and tried his best to keep

raccoons from their nests. Each year, he named the pair that returned to the Dolphin Club.

On the morning Mr. Marcelli died, five mallards showed up at once on the dock, instead of the normal two.

"He had a way with everybody — people, children, animals," David Zovickian said. "He could be sweet, and he could be gruff, but he made it work for everybody."

Mr. Marcelli is survived by a sister, Frances Rael of Millbrae, and more than 100 nieces and nephews.

Mr. Marcelli had asked to be buried at sea, Coppi said. Memorial services, which are likely to include a fleet launched from the Dolphin Club dock, are pending.

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